

REPORT ON A 'BLIND READING'

I wanted to discover how book groups round the country might react to a poet, Mary MacRae, whose work is both honed and vivid but does not come packaged in media *hype*. We supplied four groups with copies (to keep) of Macrae's posthumous collection, *Inside the Brightness of Red*, letting them loose on the challenge of poems which deal with central issues – poems about nature, relationships, creativity, life and death – disclosing her observant, subtle, probing mind.

Three groups studied poetry regularly, but one group had focussed 'across a wide spectrum of contemporary and classic fiction' but only looking at poems twice in fifteen years. All groups agreed to send comments. Some of the comments were from identified readers, others came 'anon'.

Part of the point of doing this was that MacRae's work is not an 'easy read' but offers an 'interiority' which is quite resistant, even to readers seduced by the rich references to shape, colour, texture in many of these poems. This experiment was therefore a fair test of the reader's endurance when faced with 'deep' contemporary poetry. Macrae's work is not ultimately occlusive but extraordinarily inclusive – her pleasure and pain, including the poems here about fighting illness and facing her own death, hard to resist. Another aspect was Macrae's strong sense of form and use of forms such as the Ghazal, Villanelle and Glose: readers were thrown into the deep end of sophisticated versification.

Was this simply a way of getting MacRae a few more readers, spreading the word about an exceptional talent? It was more about getting closer to how poetry engages readers today, whether experienced with poetry or not. Can we find pointers that would help to get more poetry 'out there'?

Today poetry is a 'minority art form' with (I sometimes think) more writers than readers. The critical guidance that Fiona Sampson finds to be missing in the UK ('any serious attempt to articulate what is admirable in the mainstream of contemporary poetry'*) means that readers are forced to explore for themselves. There are *hyped* poets and some of these are excellent but not all. The lack of sufficient discussion in major media also actually affects the awareness and ambition amongst poets. Much potentially strong work is spoiled by selling short the effort required to both *realise* and *communicate clearly*, suggesting no real respect for what is – let's admit – the least forgiving of art forms!

Surprisingly, given all the opportunities we have to be 'in touch', the formation of a sound and inclusive 'public taste' in the arts – and especially with regard to poetry – is a crying need. The first step qua poetry is wide reading and (if it has to be mainly self-help) educating our own taste. It was hugely encouraging when responses to MacRae's work showed 'instant recognition' of her talent – and I want to put many of these perceptive comments (which often point to particular strengths) on record – but equally interesting was the evidence of 'struggle' with aspects of the work.

Of course I warmed to generous **Nat Young** with his comment:

'This is a luscious book of poetry. It oozes beauty and wistfulness and is a joy to have by the bed – a poem at bedtime ... This has to be one of the very best books of poetry I have read in years.'

and to other readers who looked to put the originality and power of the poems into words:

'A beautiful and brave collection of poems. *Inside the Brightness of Red* the sheer descriptive beauty of the lines dazzle, and as details accumulate the reader is compelled onward before a shock of recognition hits – hard. At times I found I was holding my breath! Poems like *Blood Lines*, *Sea Glose*, *Nocturne* and *Visitation* rejoice in the mundane or colourful even as "I'm going, going, gone / No sky, no sea – the whiteness is all one." ' **Patricia Bloom**

'A rectory haunted by kindly ghosts, Japanese anemones holding secrets, the numbness of a girl who stares at the cream satin nightdress her dead mother wore in hospital; these are some of the images which stayed with me after reading this anthology of moving and accessible poems. The themes of loss, love, and wonder of nature and the nostalgia for what will come again only in memory, are accessible and moving. Poignant, haunting and stunningly visual. These poems captivated me.'

Audrey Jones

'Mary Macrae conveys herself to her readers as an independent minded and sensitive poet who is sincerely expressing her life experiences. She formulates language to transmit rhythms which emphasise and create subtle meaning, feelings and colour.' **George Abel**

'I found this book of poems to be an interesting mixture of styles and subjects. Mary MacRae was far more than just a rhymers. She had a true poetic eye with a vision for imagery through which she saw her world in a unique way. Always, she expressed it personally – sometimes perhaps a little too personally, leaving me baffled on occasions as to her real meaning. Some of her poems I found to be profoundly moving, especially those such as *Blue Material*, *Prayer* and of course, *Inside the Brightness of Red* – poems that sweat with her courage as she faced her impending death. Right to the end, her observations remained keen, courageous and compassionate.' **Alan Hall**

'The title of this collection signals something Zen-like in the engagement the poet has with her subject. Even the title poem concerning the return of her cancer – virtually a death warrant – contains a variety of distinct impressions – such as the aroma of roasting coffee beans, the texture of carrot cake, colours of boats drawn up in the mud, the salty wind and the pressure of ooze around an egret's foot – that are being celebrated for themselves and as objects with which the poet aspires to be identified. She seems to lose herself in the contemplation of these things and when she writes of the egret she almost becomes the egret...' (Unattributed)

We begin, however, even in some of these endorsements, to see some of the 'resistance' of the poems to the reader. The 'anon' who speaks of MacRae's 'Zen-like' engagement and Alan Hall, who refers to being 'baffled on occasions as to her real meaning' both touch on the large question of 'self and the poem': how 'inward' (and therefore sometimes 'baffling') can a poem be and still communicate; how effective is it (and the comment suggests it *is* effective) when the 'self' and the 'object' seem to merge ('...when she writes of the egret she becomes the egret'). There are no pat answers to such questions, but by asking them readers are probing below the surface.

A few readers found Macrae less accessible and their comments are revealing and of great interest in relation to general resistance to some contemporary poetry:

'On first reading this book, I did not really appreciate it. However, being determined to do so, I re-read the book, this time starting from the end to the beginning and found it more enjoyable. My favourite is the title poem mainly because, having had the same illness, I could empathise with Mary but don't have the same way with words so never put pen to paper on the subject. My way of coping with it was with humour and trying to put my family and friends at ease. Maybe one day, with Mary's example, I will be able to express my feelings in verse so they might understand what was really happening to me. I have read the book several times more and appreciate her way with words and how expressive she can be on such an emotive subject.' **Joyce Crawford**

'On first sight, I knew that this form of poetry does not catch my imagination but I was determined to read every word. This I did in one evening and the first poem I felt pleasure in reading was *Cells*, page 68, then *The Smile*, page 69. I then had to wait until *Inside the Brightness of Red* page 80 and

also the poems on pages 82, 83 and 87. These poems I found very personal, drawing me into her situation and sadness. I prefer rhyming poetry that tells a story.' **Sandra Moran**

Both these readers admit themselves resistant but conquered by poems that exposed suffering and were 'emotive' and 'personal'. Other readers, understandably, also found the personal poems potent:

'Above all she provides, if not a lesson in dealing with grief and fear, then a pathway already trod by a wise soul. The courage and clarity of these poems have given me the sense that there, on my bookshelf, is a friend waiting to hold my hand through the bad times.' **Beth Soule**

'She dwells on the poignancy of family relationships in *Voices* at a time when she was terminally ill.' **Lucy Vignoles**

'The power and persuasion of her poem *Inside the Brightness of Red* raises feelings and emotions relative to life and death. In so doing, she uses the technique of enjambment to stimulate the flow of thought. Another look at human destiny, 'The Smile', confirms Mary's genuine feelings for a friend in distress which abstractly parallels her own situation.' **George Abel**

All these comments point directly to one way of regenerating poetry to be important to more readers: that is, its potential direct address to times of exceptional emotional turmoil when people themselves may not have 'the same way with words'. In relation to the readers who found some of MacRae's work inaccessible, it would be good to talk about why the 'outer appearance' of a contemporary poem can be instantly off-putting – after all many of MacRae's poems are narratives (if somewhat disguised) and she does use subtle rhyme.

Readers are often 'lured in' to quite difficult poems because the content – especially nature, or works of art, or effects of light and colour – already constitute some of their own most rewarding, 'spiritual' experiences. Many comments revealed these aspects:

'The first thing that struck me was the recurring and effective use of colour as a reference.' **Anthony Magrys**

'Mary Macrae's response to the world around her invites us into a gentle place of colour and light, in which the ordinary detail of our lives springs suddenly into focus. She speaks in *Morandi's Wall*, of the artist's ability to depict, "the resonance of simple things", and those words exemplify her own skill.' **Beth Soule**

'One of Mary MacRae's strengths are her sensitivity to colour and most of her poems bear this out and are particularly poignant when related to thoughts of her impending death.' (Unattributed)

'Mary's poems make me see flowers and birds with a new eye.' **Doris Green**

'She invites us into her home, her garden, landscapes around the world, the work of artists and the places where they are encountered, evoking both the atmosphere and its impact upon her.' **Beth Soule**

'The dominant impression in MacRae's poems is an intimate awareness and appreciation of nature. She combines a heightened awareness of space and place which produces compelling poetry. I particularly enjoyed *Elder*, where her starlings "getting to the heart of the matter", make one gasp. Her attention to detail is apparent in *Japanese Anemones* in which buds "used to hold secrets I could creep into."' **Lucy Vignoles**

'Whether she writes about artists or their subjects she manages to convey an artistic image from which the reader's own thoughts can digress. Such poems as *Headlong*, or *The Artist* spring readily to mind. But also *Seasalter* and *In Giogio Morandi's Studio*, poems which tumble out of this small book begging to be read.' **Nat Young**

'in another poem such inanimate objects as Morandi's bottles and jars are invested with life:
they huddle round the easel
And only on canvas tremble into breath. ' (unattributed)

Many potential readers are not yet at first base when it comes to appreciating the subtleties of 'free verse' or the wide range of formal forms at the disposal of contemporary poets, but most of our commentators noticed MacRae's craft skills and how form and content can be linked:

'What I admire most about Mary MacRae is the craft she has used in writing these poems. She has shown how well she can use forms such as villanelle, glose and ghazal, with all the skill they need, yet has matched their formality so well to the raw feeling she conveys. She loosens up the ghazal form very cleverly in *Of Love* so that we get an echo and resonance rather than straight repetition which adds to the poignancy. The ghazal form of *In the dark* allows movement from fear to some sort of consolation and hope, with her initial blazing in the sky as a fitting memorial. The rhyming couplet at the end of *Sea Glose* is perfect and moving.' **Ann Cuthbert**

'The author used various structured poetry forms, such as glose, villanelle and ghazal well.'

Anthony Magrys

'Concerning poetic structures, Mary further reveals her technical skill ... with *Villanelle* wherein a papery ghost infiltrates her poetic muse.' **George Abel**

Without quoting every word of the comments sent, I hope I've conveyed that the four groups read Macrae's poems with the close attention I obviously think they deserve, consciously or unconsciously flagging up both the 'ways in' and the possible barriers to understanding 'deep' contemporary poetry.

The first step is the most difficult – getting readers, who may already be into serious fiction, biography, demanding books about history and science, to open a poetry book. Sometimes it would be good if that book was not by, say, Wendy Cope or Carol Ann Duffy (good as those *hyped* poets can be) because the poet's reputation is pre-packaged, the reader thinks they know what they are getting.... The next step is getting over the hump of total unfamiliarity. I am greatly in favour of prefaces or afterwords which tell us something of the poet's background, subjects, and craft – even suggest poems to read first. Someone – somewhere – should be knocking on (on Radio 3, perhaps) about particular craft skills and forms that poets use, and how demanding they are...

The most important comments that came through this experiment were intimations of the difficulty of reducing a poem – or a body of poems – to the easily understood. I am of the school that firmly believes in poetry as one of the arts of communication, but it also seems obvious that no paradigm of the real world excludes the 'ineffable'. As our readers apprehended, the riches of MacRae's *Inside the Brightness of Red* include this resistant nugget. I recommend the book to more readers!

*Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric, A Map of Contemporary British Poetry*, Chatto and Windus, 2012